

Grooves of Grace  
I Cor. 9:24-27  
Feb. 12, 2006  
Kory Wilcoxson

As I was doing some reading for today's sermon, I came across a statement that I wasn't quite sure how to take. One commentator, in interpreting this passage from 2 Corinthians, said that if Paul was writing this letter today, he would conclude this section with these words: Christianity ain't for sissies! I didn't know Paul had a Southern accent.

I thought about that a moment. Is that what Paul is saying here? That line implies that being a Christian is hard, that it's difficult, that it takes a certain amount of toughness and sacrifice. Do you buy that? Is it supposed to be hard to be a Christian? Wouldn't that deter some folks from faith? Is it possible to be a Christian and a sissy?

I wanted to know more about this athletic metaphor Paul uses to describe Christianity. His stress on the importance of running and training and punishing his body made me think of a marathon runner. The concept of the marathon began a little before Paul's time when a Greek soldier was dispatched to run to Athens with the news of victory at the battle of Marathon. After running through the night, the soldier delivered the news just before collapsing dead from overexertion. I've never run a marathon, but I have a feeling I would respond about the same way.

I tried to connect this idea of running a marathon to being a Christian, and I thought about the concept of the runner's high. Have you heard of this? They way I understood it, after a number of miles of painful running, a marathon runner's endorphins kick in, giving them a feeling of euphoria for the rest of the race. Their legs go numb, the pain fades, and they set their bodies on cruise control until the finish line. Now, that sounded a lot better to me than what Paul was saying. Isn't the some appeal to the concept of cruise control Christianity? Set your course and let God do the rest.

I was intrigued by this idea and wanted to verify it. So I emailed Gail Campbell, a member of our church and a marathon runner, and asked her if she was used to experiencing the runner's high. And I found out, much to my dismay, that it's a myth. She said for her, the endorphins kick in after the race, but while she's running, there's no such thing. In fact, she said, "I shared this with a running partner of mine and we both got a good laugh out of the idea of feeling good while running."

OK, so I can't quite justify cruise control Christianity that way, but I also am struggling with the other end of the spectrum, which Paul seems to be promoting. Are we really called to strict training and punishing our bodies in order to be faithful Christians and win the prize?

To understand a bit more of where Paul is coming from, it's helpful to know the context in which he is writing. Paul's exhortation here is set against the backdrop of the Isthmian Games, an athletic festival held every two years in Corinth. The Isthmian Games were very prestigious, second only to the Olympic Games in Athens. Athletes who won events at the Isthmian Games were considered heroes in their hometowns. They were given a wreath of laurels to wear on their heads, and that wreath was like a ticket to fame – they were given parades, seats of honor at public events, and a lifetime tax exemption, which almost makes running 26 miles sound appealing. This victory wreath was one of the most coveted prizes in the Roman Empire.

The Corinthian church would have been well aware of these games and the prizes that went with them, so it made for an effective comparison for Paul to use. The Corinthians would have not only known about the spoils of victory, but they would have also known the dedication it took to get to the winner's circle. Athletes would spend months or even years focused on training for the games. Their sole focus was preparing themselves mentally and physically to be the best. That's one of the reasons they were so respected by the Corinthians and the entire Roman Empire.

So Paul, who was not only a Christian but also a Roman citizen, uses this metaphor to help the Corinthians understand what it takes to be a Christian. It was a message the Corinthian church needed to hear, because they weren't quite living out their faith. Corinth was a cosmopolitan city, and an extremely difficult place to be a Christian because of all the distractions and temptations it held. One of the messages Paul preached when he started the church was the freedom that belief in Christ offered – freedom from sin and the fear of death. But some of the church members in Corinth were taking this idea of freedom to mean that belief in Christ also meant freedom from doing anything Christ-like. They thought once they joined the church they were free from doing anything else to grow their faith or serve. They were on cruise control Christianity; or, as I heard another pastor say, they became pew potatoes.

So Paul is reminding the Corinthians that being a Christian doesn't mean being perfect; it simply means being faithful. And to remain faithful, we must work to make our relationship with God a habit in our lives. Webster's dictionary defines a habit as "a pattern of behavior acquired as a result of frequent repetition." We all have habits. As I prepare to leave the house each morning, I load up my computer in my backpack, fix some tea for the road, and get my wallet, keys, and cellphone. That's my habit.

As we establish these patterns of behavior, they become a part of our lives, don't they? In a sense they begin to define us and exert influence over us. When I break that habit – like when I left my wallet at home on Tuesday – my day doesn't go the same. Imagine starting your day without drinking your coffee or brushing your teeth. Not only would you be out of your habit, but you'd walk around all day with no energy and bad breath! Our habits define our moods and the course of our day.

What Paul is encouraging here is the development of distinctively Christian habits. When you do something over and over and over again, it becomes a routine. At our house, you can tell which part of the carpet is the main thoroughfare for walking because of the groove we've made with our thousands and thousands of footsteps. What Paul is saying is that we need to work to establish grooves of grace in our lives, evidence of Christ's work that's been worn into hearts by frequent repetition.

How do we create these grooves of grace? Paul gives us some tips. He says first of all, we need to have a goal. Don't run around aimlessly, don't fight like a man beating the air. I remember in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, during recess, a bully name Kelsey Weems liked to pick on me. With a name like Kelsey, you think he would be getting picked on! One day, as he flicked my ear, the rage built up in me to a boiling point, and I turned around and started flailing madly, hoping to somehow hit something solid, like Kelsey's nose. My friends later told me I looked like I was trying to shoo away a bee. I was not successful in my endeavor because I didn't have a goal, lucky for Kelsey's nose.

An axiom that is true in all of life is that to succeed, we have to have a goal. For the athletes at the games, their goal was a crown of laurels that would wither after a few

days. Paul says as Christians, we should have a much more worthy goal in mind. That goal, that prize, is simply a life worthy of God, a life that strives to show gratitude for God's love and that strives to be faithful to our calling. It's a life lived with a purpose.

A cartoon showed two men on Mars looking down at the people in this world scurrying here, there, and everywhere. One said to another, "What are they doing?"

The other replied, "They are going."

The first one said, "But where are they going?"

The second one replied, "Oh, they're not going anywhere; they're just going."

Where are you going? What habits are you establishing? What prize are you striving for? You've heard people say, "Practice what you preach," but I believe our actions preach about what we practice. If we practice negative attitudes, if we practice destructive behaviors, if we practice cruise control Christianity, then that's the message we send, regardless of what comes of our mouths. But if we practice living in grooves of grace, then we preach God's grace to others, just as we have received grace from Christ.

What is your goal as a Christian? What are you working toward? If you can't answer that, then I offer this invitation: Don't just sit in the grandstand watching, get in there and run the race. Set a goal for yourself and strive toward it. Maybe is more prayer time with God, maybe its more consistent worship experiences, maybe its giving more of yourself to others. It's doesn't matter what it is, as long as it's moving you forward in your faith. Set your goal, establish your groove of grace. Christianity ain't for sissies? I don't know. But I do know this: Christianity ain't for spectators.